

The Joxer Prophecy

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Summary: Repost, no new text. Joxer gets a magical tattoo, and gets involved in a war between Dahok and the Gods of Olympus.

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****Disclaimer**:** All X-WP characters belong to Universal and Renaissance Pictures, no infringement of copyright is intended, blah blah. No profit will be earned as a result of this work (although I wish it did!).

****Classification**:** Adventure (no sex)

****Warnings**:** Second attempt at fan fiction, hopefully not too many mistakes were made in the writing of this fanfic. References to many X-WP and H-TLJ episodes (from all seasons including current ones) are present.

****Summary**:** Joxer is magically given an ancient tattoo from a five hundred year old man, and has to deal with the consequences in a war between Dahok and the Olympian gods.

****Rating**:** PG-13 (some violence, but no more than what you see on the show)

****Title**:** The Joxer Prophecy

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><p>In the bright halls of Olympus, Zeus the King of the Gods sat brooding on his throne, staring into space. All of a sudden his head jerked up, as if something had jolted him out of his reverie. "Now what?" he grumbled to himself.<p>

All of a sudden Aphrodite, the Greek Goddess of Love appeared in a shower of light, and with a big smile went over and hugged her father and kissed him on the cheek. "Hi Daddy! What's happening?" she said enthusiastically.

"Hello, sweetheart," he said trying to return her enthusiasm. "What are you doing here?"

Aphrodite's smile disappeared, and she looked ready to cry. "Don't tell me you've forgotten!"

"No, no of course not!" Zeus said uncomfortably. "I was just, er, just checking!"

"Good!" she said, happy again. "After all, five hundred years is enough!"

'Five hundred -?' Zeus thought to himself. Then suddenly he remembered. "My promise!" he exclaimed.

"You bet!" she said in a relieved sort of voice. "I mean, can you imagine being stuck under the ground alone for that long? What a major drag! I still say he didn't deserve it, you know!"

"Now Aphrodite, let's not start that again!" Zeus said sternly. "Your servant Tigellinus was cursed to live like that, all those centuries, for consorting with Dahok precisely because immortality was what he least desired. He should have known perfectly well what would be in store for him, after talking to that immortal fool Zarathrustra. I was tempted to let him suffer down there forever, you know. But after being mortal myself for even that short amount of time, I'm prepared to be merciful now and let him enter the afterlife."

"I know, Daddy, I know," said Aphrodite soothingly. "Please, can we get this over with? I'm scheduled for the most incredible sauna and delicious backrub soon!"

"Oh very well," said Zeus gruffly. He stood up from his throne, held up one arm and made a fist. A ball of light appeared, glowing with a brightness that was too painful and intense for mortal eyes to look at. With a grunt, Zeus hurled it down towards the floor, and it passed through and disappeared on its journey.

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><p>Some time later, a lone man was walking along a road in the countryside, and staring at the sky. He wore a foolish-looking helmet and ill-fitting hand-pounded armour. Suddenly he stopped and removed his helmet, dropping it to the ground. In great pain, he put his hands to his ears, as an unearthly whine began all around him. Staggering about, he noticed an incredibly bright white ball of light descend from the sky and slam into a mountain range close by. An immense explosion was seen and felt, as the ground started to tremble.<p>

'By the Gods!' he thought to himself. 'What was that?'

Eventually the rumbling died away, and the man looked at where the explosion had occurred. 'I sure hope that thing didn't hit anybody!'

he mused, 'I better go check it out. This is definitely a job for Joxer the Mighty!'

Joxer started off, and eventually arrived at the site. There were a lot of boulders and debris, but not a single person in sight. Relieved, Joxer was about to set off on his way again, when he noticed a cave entrance blocked by a big boulder. He went up to it and called out, "Hello? Anyone in there?"

He didn't hear anything in reply, and was just about to turn away when he thought he heard very dimly a voice calling, "Hello?"

"Hang on, I'm coming!" Joxer yelled. He tried to move the boulder out of the way, but was restricted in what position he could get by the armour he wore. Grumbling, he took it off and cast it aside, and started to heave once more at the rock. Amazingly, it **MOVED** – just enough for Joxer to squeeze past into the cave.

"Hello?" Joxer called out as he moved down-slope into the darkness. "Hello? Where are you?"

All of a sudden there was an ominous rumbling noise, and Joxer began to get afraid. Before he could do anything, everything started collapsing all around him. Trying to turn around and get out, he quickly disappeared in the rush of falling rocks and dirt from the roof of the tunnel.

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><p>Joxer came to slowly, groggily, and found he was lying on the floor in a spacious cavern, well-lit by torches placed at strategic positions. He struggled to get up, and found himself close to an old man, lying down with his head up against the wall, breathing in labored wheezes.<p>

"Hey!" cried out Joxer. "What's going on?" He noticed the old man's condition, and scrambled over to try to help. "Are you okay?"

"No," replied the old man tiredly. "Although soon that won't matter."

Joxer tried to reassure him, "Look, don't worry, I'm Joxer the Mighty, I'll get us both out of here!"

The old man gave a dry chuckle. "What makes you think I want to leave?" he said wryly.

Joxer looked stunned. "Huh?"

"Come closer, boy," he said. Joxer did so, wondering what was going on. "I don't have much time. Don't interrupt, because I won't have the chance to tell my story twice."

"But –"

"Ha, and I told you not to interrupt. Listen to me. My name is Tigellinus. At one time I was a priest, a scholar and a favorite of Aphrodite. I take it you know who that is –" the gods of Olympus are still around?"

"Yes, they were gone for a while but they're back now," said Joxer dumbfounded.

"I see. I thought it was them that sent that missile to kill me, but I couldn't be sure, not after all these centuries."

"Centuries?" said Joxer in amazement.

"I've been imprisoned in here for five hundred years, Joxer the Mighty," said Tigellinus wearily. "No doubt the world has changed a lot since my time, but I was pretty sure THEY were still around. They know how to look after themselves â€" for the most part, anyway."

"What -" Joxer started to say. Then he said, "Why were you put in here for all that time?"

Tigellinus coughed. "Doesn't matter now. They thought I became an ally of an evil god named Dahok, but actually all I was trying to do was learn about him, so that the people of Greece could defend themselves when the prophecy took place and his rebirth into our world was complete."

Joxer looked scared again. "Prophecy? Dahok's coming - again?"

Tigellinus looked at Joxer curiously. "You already know about him? Yes, I can see it in your eyes. So, the time of the prophecy has finally come. I had hoped not to see it."

"What prophecy? What are you talking about?" said Joxer desperately.

"Five hundred years ago Joxer, I made a journey to the land of Chin. There were magicians and prophets there then, more powerful than any the world had ever seen. I don't know what the oracles are like today, but back then they could accomplish miracles, and know the future with perfect accuracy. The Gods grew jealous of them, and I think it was Ares who eventually killed them all. Before he completed his task though, the last Chin Master left a message for them. Taunting them, or so I believe." He held up his right arm, and Joxer saw a series of symbols in the Chin alphabet tattooed down his forearm. "I don't think they ever knew about this. At first, I was sorry I wasn't able to taunt them with it myself. During the last one hundred and fifty years though, I've grown worried. What if the message is so important, without it everyone will perish, God and mortal alike?"

Joxer was really worried now. "Look, it'll be okay. I'll get you out of here. Besides, I've met Aphrodite and Ares â€" if it's that important, I'll get them to listen to you, or at least I can get my friends Xena and Gabrielle to convince them to -"

"No, Joxer, it's too late for that," the old man said. "It's over for me at last, but I don't want the world to die with me. That's why you have to take my place. Take this message out into the world. I hate to curse you like this, but desperate times call for desperate measures."

Joxer was puzzled. "How do I -?"

Tigellinus reached out. "Give me your arm."

Joxer complied, uncertain as to what was going on. The old man placed both hands on his right arm, closed his eyes and started speaking in the ancient Chin language. Suddenly Joxer felt as if his arm was on fire. He yelled in agony, as his forearm was bathed in an angry blue light. Unable to cope with the pain, he passed out on the floor of the cavern.

* * *

><p>Joxer woke up later â€" how long it had been, he didn't know. The lighting in the cavern was a lot dimmer though, the torches had nearly burned out completely. Joxer looked around for Tigellinus, but couldn't see him.<p>

"Tigellinus? Where are you?" There was no reply. Joxer grabbed one of the torches and looked closely at where the old man had been lying. There was a thin pile of dust â€" Joxer guessed that that was all that was left of his new acquaintance. 'I can't even give him a decent funeral,' he thought to himself. Looking around the cave, he suddenly felt the ground starting to tremble again. Turning quickly, he started to move off, desperate not to get caught in another cave-in. There was a light shining dimly in the distance, and Joxer raced uphill along the tunnel towards it. Later he would wonder as to how strange it was that it was clear of the rubble from the previous earthquake, but right then he was only focussed on getting out alive.

As the tunnel ended and Joxer squeezed out, the quake increased in severity, and the entire mountain seemed to collapse. Joxer stumbled around briefly, fell, got up and then started to run as fast as he could to get away before something else happened to him.

Eventually he reached the same road he had been travelling on before the ball of lightning had come, and he stopped to rest. He bent over, breathing hard, his sides aching horribly, when all of a sudden a horse and cart came over the hill towards him. An old, well-dressed couple was in the cart, and as they drew level with him, the man pulled on the reins to bring them to a stop. His wife looked at Joxer in concern and said, "Are you all right, young man?"

Joxer straightened up and nodded, trying to slow down his breathing. "I guess," he said.

The man looked at him and said, "We're on our way into town. Do you want us to give you a lift?"

"Yes, please, you're most kind," said Joxer, still huffing and puffing. Slowly he climbed onto the back of the cart, and collapsed onto his back as they started to move off. The two old folks looked at him in concern, but decided it was none of their business and didn't question him any further.

The town of Aramathea was crowded, but Joxer didn't mind â€" it was something of a relief after everything he'd been through recently. He made his way to an inn, got a table and ordered the strongest drink they had.

About three quarters of the way through it, he noticed Xena and Gabrielle enter the tavern. The blonde-haired Amazon Queen Gabrielle spotted him as well, and nudged Xena, the dark-haired Warrior Princess who then also saw him. They came up to him, and Xena said wryly, "Hello, Joxer."

Joxer nodded drunkenly. "Uh, hi Xena. Hello, Gabby."

Gabrielle looked at him. "How long have you been here, Joxer?"

He shook his head in a stupor. "Don't know. Don't want to know."

Xena looked at him again in that wry manner. "Joxer, I think you've had enough. Come on, let's get you sobered up -"

Joxer cried out, "NO!" A few of the patrons briefly turned to look at him, then went about their own business again. "No, I don't want to sober up. 'Cause then I'll have to remember!"

Gabrielle frowned. "Remember what, Joxer?"

Joxer seemed to sag. "The man I met today that died."

Xena and Gabrielle looked at each other, then sympathetically at him. "It'll be okay, Joxer, just don't -" started Gabrielle.

"No!" Joxer cried out again. "You don't understand! I think Dahok's coming soon!"

Both Xena and Gabrielle froze. Then Xena grabbed him by the collar, pulled him so close their noses were almost touching. "Shut up, you drunken fool!" she hissed at him. "I swear, one more word and I'll -"

"Xena, wait," said Gabrielle calmly. Too calmly. "Let him say what he has to. It'll be okay."

"No it won't," said Xena hurriedly, letting go of Joxer to face her friend. "You don't have to listen to this!"

A filthy customer of the tavern had wandered over, and in a low hopeful voice said to the women, "Hey, you girls feel like going to a party?"

"Beat it," said Joxer drunkenly, then hiccuped.

"Who's gonna make me?" he said to Joxer in a threatening voice.

"Look, we're not interested right now," Gabrielle said hastily. "Please, ignore him -"

"Why should I?" he said scornfully.

Xena started to get angry and letting go of Joxer told the man, "She told you, we're not interested. So like he said, beat it."

The man withdrew a knife, and moved around them saying, "Nobody talks like that to me!"

The situation quickly got way out of hand. The attacker lunged at Gabrielle, who parried with her staff, and then a major fight started. The guy must have had a lot of friends, for suddenly many men were attacking Xena and Gabrielle. Eventually after a huge battle, Xena and Gabrielle using sword, chakram and staff had their opponents either lying on the floor unconscious, or groaning in pain as they limped away.

Xena looked at Gabrielle and said, "We definitely need to work on our social skills."

Gabrielle replied, "And I thought they just wanted us for our minds!"

By this time Joxer was weaving around on his feet, clearly about to lose his balance. "The end of the world. The prophecy!" he said in a slurred voice. Then he passed out, falling face-first onto the table.

* * *

><p>Joxer came to, groaning with a terrible hangover. 'Oh my head,' he thought to himself. 'What's going on? What did I â€" oh no. Tigellinus. Xena. Gabrielle. I think I'm in big trouble.'<p>

His thoughts seemed to be fairly accurate, for when he looked up he saw Xena and Gabrielle staring at him with unreadable expressions on their faces.

"So help me, Joxer, if you don't apologise to Gabrielle right now -" started Xena.

"I'm sorry!" said Joxer nervously, cutting Xena off, and trying to back away from them. He noticed they were in a campsite in the woods, so there was nowhere to hide. He ran the fingers of his right hand through his hair, trying to get the words straight. "Uh, where are we? How did I get here?"

"You're in our camp, Joxer, we carried you here on Argo after you passed out in that tavern. My horse wasn't exactly thrilled with the experience either. Now I want you to get up and leave, and if I see your face again -"

Gabrielle interrupted her, "Xena, wait, look!" She took hold of Joxer's arm, and carefully examined the tattoo symbols on it. "Joxer, where did you get this!"

Joxer withdrew his arm and examined it himself. For the first time, he saw the same writing on his arm that he had seen on the arm of Tigellinus. He remembered the old man's words, 'You have to take my place. Take this message out into the world.'

Joxer sighed. "It's a message, Gabrielle. I only wish I knew what it meant."

Xena came over and examined his arm herself. "I see what you mean, Gabrielle," she said slowly. "This is the language of the kingdom of Chin, yet â€" yet it isn't." she remarked in obvious puzzlement.

"Huh?" said Gabrielle.

Xena tried to explain. "When I was hiding with Lao Ma, I learned a little of the written language. Picked up a little more in the years since then, but this â€" this is like nothing I've ever seen before."

"You can't translate it?" Joxer asked.

"No," said Xena frowning. "Some of the symbols are â€" no. It's meaningless to me. Who did this to you?"

"A five hundred year old man," said Joxer quietly.

"What?" said Gabrielle, blinking in incredulity.

Xena grabbed his arm again. "Five hundred years?" she said excitedly.

"Xena, don't encourage him!" Gabrielle said in exasperation.

"Yes, I see!" said Xena, paying no attention to her. "No wonder I didn't recognise the symbols. The alphabet has changed so much over the centuries, but once you know what to look for â€" but still, I can't -" Suddenly she stopped, and looked at Joxer again. "Did you say â€" a five hundred year old man!"

"Uh, yeah," Joxer said, flinching away, expecting his nose to be pulled or something equally painful.

Xena looked at him. "Tell me the whole story. And don't leave anything out."

Joxer stared at both of them, and started to speak. He had picked up a few bard tricks from Gabrielle over the years, and so both listeners listened without interruption as he told them the story of how he met Tigellinus, of the old man's curse and history, and his death in the cave. Amazingly, he didn't include any false bragging of heroism on his own part, a fact that was not unnoticed by Xena and Gabrielle, who realised now how deeply the events had affected the young man before them. "And you know the rest of it," he said miserably, "You found me in that tavernâ€"|"

"Joxer," said Gabrielle in a more kindly voice, "you couldn't have saved him, you know that don't you?"

"I guess," said Joxer still miserable.

"I mean it, Joxer," said Gabrielle more firmly. "He wanted to die. Five hundred years of torment was enough. I knew the Gods were cruel, but things like this are too much! Sometimes I wonder whether
_"

Xena interrupted them. "Wait up, we need to focus here. Joxer, are you sure he didn't say anything else? Nothing more about this prophecy?"

Joxer shook his head. "No, I've told you everything."

Xena started pacing around. "I don't like this. From what I've heard, these magicians that Tigellinus spoke of, they were the stuff of myth and legend. Stories with which to scare little children at night. If they were real " well, no wonder Ares destroyed them. Imagine having such people on both sides in a fight, spying out the battle plans of the armies and such " it would make war obsolete! But this thing about Dahok worries me. If the Gods had known, maybe everything that's happened since Brittania could have been avoided -"

"Xena," Gabrielle said quietly, "don't beat yourself up about that anymore, please. What's done is done. I think we need to concentrate on figuring out this message."

"Right!" agreed Joxer. "But how? Go all the way to Chin?"

"That'll take too long," said Xena pensively. "We need to know NOW. For all we know, Dahok could be making plans to show up again tomorrow. I don't think there's any other choice."

Joxer squeaked, "You mean " ARES?"

Xena nodded grimly. "I don't like it, and if anyone's got a better idea, I'd love to hear it, believe me."

There was a silence, as Joxer and Gabrielle looked at each other. Then Gabrielle turned to look back at Xena and said, "Do you really think we can trust him?"

"No," Xena said immediately, "but like I said, I don't think there's any other choice."

* * *

><p>The next day, all three travellers arrived at Ares' main temple, and stopped just outside the front entrance. "You really think he'll be here?" said Joxer looking around nervously, without seeing any temple guards.<p>

"I'm pretty sure," Xena replied, and they went in. The place was empty of people, but looked anything except abandoned. There was a definite air of menace to the place, as befitted a temple dedicated to a god of war. Xena closed her eyes, and shouted "Ares!"

All of a sudden Ares the Greek God of War appeared in a blaze of light. He stood smirking at the three visitors. "Welcome to my humble home," he said with a sneer of malice on his features. "Sorry I don't have any refreshments to offer, but then I don't think you people came to pray to me, now, did you?"

Xena said scathingly, "The only thing I'd like to sacrifice for you would be your dead body."

"Oooh, touchy, touchy Xena," he said with the smirk growing bigger. "After everything we've been through, you insult me right here in my own house."

Xena snarled in anger and was about launch into another tirade against him, when Gabrielle touched her arm and said quietly, "Xena." Xena looked at her, and made an effort to calm down. "Listen Ares, we have a problem. I think Dahok's coming -"

Ares raised his eyebrows. "Tell me another one."

"Damn it Ares -!"

Ares held up his hands in a gesture of truce. "I know, I know. Can I help it if you bring out the war god in me? Look, don't worry about Dahok. Now that Zeus is back and Hera isn't distracting him anymore, and since Hercules and I kicked Dahok's butt so effectively, I don't think we've got anything major to be concerned about."

Up until now, Joxer had been silent, keeping in the background. He doubted that Ares had really noticed he was even there. But suddenly, almost without meaning to, he asked, "What about the prophecy?"

Ares turned to look at him. "Well, well, if it isn't the hero wannabe!" he said putting an amazing slur to the insult. "How is it someone as incompetent as you isn't dead yet? I've really got to talk to the Fates about it one day."

Joxer looked scared. Gabrielle put one arm on his in reassurance and said, "Why don't you answer his question?" she said levelly.

"What question is that â€" _Mom_?" he said with an evil grin.

Xena started to forward with a growl and a furious expression on her face, and both Joxer and Gabrielle had to restrain her. "You know perfectly well, you -!"

"Tsk, tsk, Xena, you've really got to watch that temper of yours. It isn't doing your blood pressure a bit of good, you know." he mocked with a false tone of concern.

Joxer came up to him and extended his right arm. "Can you translate what this says or not?" he asked.

Ares looked at the writing for a few moments, and then into Joxer's face with a look of utter surprise. Then complete fury overcame him, and with a snarl on his face he grabbed Joxer around the neck with one hand and lifted him clear off the ground. "Do you really have a death wish, showing me something like that?" he said with a tone indicating bloody murder.

Joxer gurgled, choking, unable to reply. Xena drew her sword and advanced on the god. "Let him go Ares, or I swear you'll regret it!"

Ares looked at her, then shrugged and tossed Joxer away as if he was a piece of smelly garbage. He landed in a heap, and Gabrielle went over to help him up. "Well, that could have gone better," mumbled Joxer partly to himself.

Gabrielle shushed him, and the two of them watched as Ares and Xena squared off against each other. "Really, Xena," Ares said, "if you wanted to get my attention, there must be a lot of easier ways than this."

"I don't want your attention," growled Xena, "But I need it for the moment. What exactly does the message say?"

Ares looked at her in surprise. "Now why would I need to tell you that? Those lies you wrote on that fool's arm don't even deserve my consideration!"

"I didn't write that, Ares," she said in a menacing tone.

Ares looked at her in astonishment, then laughed in sudden understanding. "Of course, I meant when dear Gabrielle the bard wrote -"

Xena interrupted him. "She didn't do it either."

Ares looked stunned. "Then who -?"

Xena called out, "Joxer, why don't you tell him?"

Joxer came forward. "Does the name Tigellinus ring any bells?"

Ares looked at him uncomprehendingly. "Tigellinus?" he said. "What -?" Then he cut himself off, suddenly looking pale. "How did you know about him?" he demanded.

"I saw him die," said Joxer, bowing his head in sadness.

"WHAT?" Ares bellowed in alarm and fury. He quickly came over to Joxer and roughly grabbed his arm, examining the Chin symbols again. He looked at the young man and demanded, "How did you get this?"

"What does it say?" asked Joxer with unthinking curiosity.

"NEVER MIND!" Ares shouted. "Answer me Joxer, or I swear I'll make Tartarus seem like the Elysian fields compared to the torture I'll create for you!"

"Don't push it, Ares!" Xena threatened him.

"Hey, everybody calm down!" said Joxer worriedly. "We're all supposed to be on the same side here, right? Ares, I don't know how he did it, all I know is when I woke up the marks were there and he was gone."

Ares stared at him. Then he moved back, and eyed them all very carefully. "Don't any of you move," he said. "I'll be back. And Xena -"

"What?" she said.

He looked very grave, all traces of mockery gone. "Guard that message and this idiot with your life." He disappeared in a swirl of light and colour.

Joxer looked stunned. Gabrielle looked worried. Xena's expression was unfathomable. Joxer summed it all up for them very well when he said, "I've got a REALLY bad feeling about all of this."

* * *

><p>Ares appeared on Olympus in Zeus' throne room. Without so much as a howdy-do, he strode straight to his father and demanded, "Is this

some kind of joke!"<p>

Zeus stared at his son with a kind of weary resignation. "What are you talking about?"

"You know perfectly well!" Ares said angrily. "Has being mortal made you go senile?"

Zeus looked at him menacingly, and in the Olympian background thunder rumbled. "Watch your tongue, Ares," he said slowly, "I haven't forgotten yet about your involvement in that business with the Labyrinth. Everyone hated that place, and somehow I don't think trapping all the Gods besides yourself there has won you a lot of friends lately."

Ares backed off, and mumbled something which sounded like, "Sorry." Then he straightened up and looked his father in the eye and said, "What's going on with Tigellinus?"

"Tigellinus?" Zeus echoed in surprise.

"You wouldn't let me kill him all those centuries ago, just because Aphrodite flashed her damned pleading eyes at you, and so you just left him in that cave. Is he still there?" Ares demanded to know.

Zeus grew angry again. "If you annoy me much more boy, I'll make you mortal again, and so help me this time there'll be no point for anybody to help you find your sword."

Ares backed off again, the threat being quite terrifying to him. "Okay, okay. So is he or isn't he?" he said.

"What?"

"Tigellinus!" shouted Ares. "You said you were going to leave him there to rot underground forever, Zarathrustra's fate wasn't torture enough for the likes of him. Have you changed your mind?"

Zeus shrugged. "Actually yes, Aphrodite asked me to release him from his curse, so I figured I may as well -"

Ares screamed, "What have you DONE!"

Zeus frowned. "What's the matter with you, Ares? You're acting like it's the end of Olympus!"

"IT MIGHT BE!" Ares yelled.

"Talk sense, boy!"

"Have you ever met that fool called Joxer? I hate to even think it, but he may be our best hope to survive!" Ares turned and walked away, disappearing with the customary dazzle of light. Zeus frowned as he stared after him, wondering what was going on, and deciding to keep a very close eye on his scheming son for a while.

* * *

><p>Ares quickly appeared in the abode of the Fates, personified by

the three women who were different aspects of the same entity. They represented the three faces of Fate – the maid Clotho, the mother Lachesis, and the crone Atropos, three sisters who tended the tapestry of life for the mortal world. Clotho was busy spinning new threads for the Tapestry, representing newborn mortal life, Lachesis was measuring the existing threads woven in and Atropos was cutting a thread, ending a mortal life when Ares barged in on them. "Are you part of this?" he demanded angrily at the three aspects.<p>

"Not now, Ares, we're busy," said Clotho, not even looking at him.

"Listen to me, damn it!" Ares said urgently. "It's important!"

"Like it was when you bargained with us to prematurely cut Xena's thread?" asked Atropos in her old but powerful voice.

"Ancient history," Ares brushed that aside impatiently. "Forget about that. I need to know about Tigellinus. Have you cut his thread?"

"Yes," she replied. "Not long ago, as a matter of fact."

Ares closed his eyes in pain. When he opened them again, all three sisters were staring at him, finally realising that something important was going on. "Where did he go?" Ares asked. "Tartarus or the Elysian fields? There's no time to lose, believe me."

Lachesis went over to the tapestry, and examined it carefully. She frowned to herself. "That's strange," she said.

"What?" asked Ares.

"He's in neither place," she replied. "His thread has disappeared."

"What are you talking about?" Ares demanded. "Is he in one of the other Lands of the Dead? Did he join those damned Chin Masters?"

"I've never seen anything like this before," Lachesis said in amazement. "There's no sign of him anywhere. It's as if he never existed. Ares, what do you know about this? If things like this start happening to other threads, the entire tapestry could become unravelled –"

Ares paled again. "Dahok?" he whispered in alarm.

The three Fates looked at him in concern. "What does he have to do with this?" asked Clotho.

Ares didn't reply. Instead he asked, "What about the mortal named Joxer?"

Lachesis examined another part of the tapestry. "His thread ended on the mortal plane yesterday as well," she said.

"That's right," agreed Atropos remembering, "It's a shame when they go so young."

"He's dead?" Ares said in amazement.

"He should be," all three of them said.

Ares vanished without another word, the light giving an afterglow on the eyes. The Fates stared at each other in alarm, having gotten the feeling that a great deal of chaos was going to be unleashed in their tapestry.

* * *

><p>In the temple of Ares, Xena, Gabrielle and Joxer were just hanging around, getting extremely bored. Joxer had started singing in an effort to relieve the tedium:<p>

_ "Joxer the Mighty, _

_ Roams through the countryside, _

_ Never needs a place to hide, _

_ With Gabby as his side-kick, _

_ Fighting with her little stick -" _

"All right Joxer, enough!" cried out Gabrielle. "You must have sung that stupid song at least twenty times!"

"Twenty-three," said Xena, smiling in an amused manner as Gabrielle's patience finally snapped. Her own way of passing the time had been to watch the antics of her two friends, laughing on the inside at how Gabrielle had tried to prevent herself from exploding and ultimately failing.

"Whatever!" she exclaimed. Turning to Joxer, she said, "If you have to sing, could you please, please pick something else?"

Looking hurt, Joxer simply said, "I don't feel like singing anymore."

Gabrielle ground her teeth together and made a noise of exasperation. "Look Joxer -"

Just then Aphrodite appeared in a sparkle of lights. "Whew, what an ug-lee dÃ©cor!" she said looking around, in her most patronising voice.

Gabrielle turned to her and snapped, "What do you want?"

"Wow, does this girl have a severe case of PMT or what?" Aphrodite smirked at Gabrielle's growing anger. "So, where is that so-uncool brother of mine?"

"If you're talking about Ares, we don't know," replied Xena.

"Bummer," Aphrodite replied. "I suppose after that disgraceful way he blew up at Daddy about Tigellinus, he's off somewhere licking his wounds -"

"What do you know about Tigellinus?" Xena quickly interrupted, intrigued now by what the goddess was saying.

"Oh, hey, but he was so COOL in the old days!" she said in a romantic sigh. "It's such a shame he got involved with that stupid Dahok, he could have been -"

"He was NOT involved with Dahok, you bimbo excuse for a goddess!" Gabrielle practically shouted. "He was trying to learn about his weaknesses, so we mortals could defend ourselves when the time came -"

"Excuse me!" said Aphrodite haughtily. "I suppose you're the world's foremost expert on Dahok?"

"I probably know more than you," said Gabrielle darkly, "he forced me to bear his child, remember?"

"Oh, yeah," said Aphrodite with the grace to look shame-faced. But such attitudes did not "could not" last for long among the Olympian gods, who considered mortals as things to be used for their sport or whim. "Well, I can't say it's been fun. I definitely need some space. I'm outta here."

"Wait!" called out Xena, before she could vanish. "Maybe you can translate the message for us!"

"What message?" Aphrodite looked at her in confusion.

"Joxer!" Xena said. Joxer came up to them, and smiled shyly at the goddess. "Hello, Aphrodite," he said.

"Hi there studmuffin," she said with a big smile. "Hey, what have you done to yourself? You're looking a lot cuter these days!"

Joxer blushed and looked away, but couldn't help being pleased by the compliment. "You really think so?"

"You betcha! You been working out?"

Gabrielle interrupted in an angry voice, "Could we please get on with this? Joxer, just show her your arm, will you?"

"Whoa, back off sweetie!" said Aphrodite with a smile. "Pull your claws in, I'm not trying to steal him away!"

"Away from who?" asked Gabrielle in puzzlement.

The other women sighed, wondering whether or not to explain how Joxer really felt about Gabrielle. It was amazing how she could never see how much Joxer loved her, but then no one ever said that life would be easy. Joxer himself put an end to the matter, by sticking out his arm and asking the goddess, "Do you know what this writing means?"

Aphrodite looked at it and whistled. "This is old. Haven't seen stuff like this in centuries. Sorry, but I don't have a clue. Hey, where'd you get the idea to go retro like this?"

"Never mind," sighed Joxer in disappointment.

Aphrodite just stared at him and shrugged. "Tell that no-good brother of mine, I'll be baaaack." She disappeared with a sprinkle of light and stars.

"Good riddance," said Gabrielle, as the others looked at her and tried not to smirk.

* * *

><p>Ares appeared suddenly, looking worried. He said, "We've got problems."<p>

Xena rolled her eyes at him. "Tell me another one," she mocked, and Ares understood what she was doing. Remarkably however, he didn't take her up on it. In fact, he hardly seemed to even notice.

"Joxer, come over here," he ordered. Obediently, Joxer came over and stood before Ares. The god brought up a stone pendant on a chain, and said gruffly, "Put this on."

Joxer stared at him and asked, "Why?"

Ares grew mad. "Just do it, you moron!"

Joxer looked hurt. "Okay, okay, you don't have to get all bent out of shape about this!"

Ares sighed and closed his eyes briefly. "If there was anyone I could blame for needing you Joxer, I swear I would -"

Xena cut him off, by now worried herself. "What's going on? What are you up to?"

Ares shrugged. "Something that might save us from Dahok, I don't know for sure yet. I'm having to make this up as I go along, and believe me I don't like it that way. If only I could talk to Tigellinus -"

Joxer interrupted, "Why not? You're a god aren't you?"

Gabrielle put in, "Somehow I don't think he'd be very cooperative with the Gods even if Ares did speak with him."

Ares glared at them. "Don't push me," he threatened. "He would if I could find him, but I can't. The Fates have lost track of him, and Hades hasn't seen him anywhere. His shade is â€"missing."

"Missing?" said Joxer. "How did that happen?"

Ares looked at him but didn't answer. He just held out the pendant, and Joxer took it and put it on. He winced and gave a slight yelp, "Hey, this thing is cold!"

Ares frowned. "Don't wimp out on me just yet, will you? Come on, we don't have much time."

"Where are we going?" asked Gabrielle.

"You and Xena, nowhere," Ares replied briefly. "Why don't you go home?"

"But Poteidaia is miles away!" she exclaimed.

Xena narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Why are you trying to get rid of us, Ares?" she said accusingly. "I know you're up to something â€" and what exactly are you planning for Joxer? What's with the little gift?"

Joxer nodded. "Yeah," he agreed, "you'd better tell us everything, or I'm not going anywhere with you!"

Ares sighed. "You picked a hell of a time to start growing a backbone!"

Gabrielle cried out, "Hey, don't talk that way about our friend!"

Ares looked at her and Xena, and quickly waved his hand, pointing at one then the other. Suddenly both of them froze solid, without breath or heartbeat.

"Xena? Gabby?" Joxer said, going up to them and waving a hand in front of their faces. Nothing happened. "What did you do?" cried out Joxer in alarm.

"Nothing permanent, don't worry," Ares said gruffly. "It's just that I'd prefer our upcoming conversation to be free of the irritating little blonde's interruptions, and Xena just needs to relax a little."

"This is your idea of relaxation?" Joxer asked in confusion.

"It has its own special appeal," Ares said with a fleeting grin. "Now, let's get down to business. You want answers? Well, I've got them, some of them anyway."

Joxer looked glad. "Great! Let's have them already!"

Ares didn't immediately reply. "First, you tell me about Tigellinus, how you met him."

Joxer frowned. "Well, I found him dying after someone had sent something to kill him in his cave -"

Ares interrupted him. "That was Zeus with his lightning. Wait a minute," he said carefully, "did you say AFTER he was attacked?"

"Yes," said Joxer at once.

"Impossible," said Ares with certainty.

"But I'm telling you -" Joxer started.

"You don't understand," Ares said firmly. "That couldn't have been Tigellinus you saw, not the real one anyway. He would have been incinerated instantly, the moment he was struck."

Joxer looked scared and uncertain. "Then who -"

Ares shrugged. "His spirit, maybe. Kinda puts a whole new twist on things, doesn't it?" his grin was very menacing.

Joxer was still looking nervous. "I did see his remains afterward, he was just a pile of dust and ashes -"

Ares said quickly, "After you got the tattoo?"

Joxer shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

Ares said looking at him speculatively, "Anything unusual take place before that happened?"

Joxer shook his head. "No. I mean, we just talked, when I woke up after that cave-in -"

"Cave-in?" said Ares to himself. "Of course!"

"What?" said Joxer puzzled.

"The answer to what's been puzzling me â€" part of it, anyway," Ares said. "I asked the Fates about you, when exactly your time was due. Turns out it was yesterday."

Joxer's eyes were huge. "WHAT?"

"You didn't survive that cave-in, Joxer," Ares said matter-of-factly.

"But â€" but I must have, he must have dragged me out, I mean I'm here aren't I?"

"Yes," agreed Ares. "But as to whether you're truly alive or not â€" that's something else entirely."

Joxer was now looking terrified. "Huh? I mean â€" so what happens to me? As soon as this is over, or when whatever's in the prophecy has happened - I'm going to the Elysian fields? Or -" he winced, "- that other place?"

Ares shrugged again. "I don't know. I guess that's up to Hades. In the meantime," he said straightening up, "we've got a war to fight."

Joxer still looked scared. He went up to Ares and said, "Are you sure you've got the right guy? I mean, I'm always saying I'm Joxer the Mighty and all, but I'm not even half the warrior Xena or even Gabby is! It would make a lot more sense for one of them to -"

Ares started pacing. "No, it has to be you," he said angrily. "That's part of the prophecy too."

Joxer looked puzzled. "Huh?"

Ares stopped, and faced him. "Tigellinus was always too sneaky for his own good," he said with the anger still present. "He studied with the Chin Masters, you know; he almost became one of them himself. Somehow he was able to do what he did. How he did it, I don't know."

And do you have any idea how difficult it is for a god to admit that? What I do know is that according to the prophecy, Dahok will try to take over the world many times, and this time around, YOU are the key to stopping him."

Joxer gulped. "Me? You're nuts! How?"

Ares glared at him. "That information is on a need-to-know basis, and at this time you do not need to know."

Joxer started, "But -"

"Shut up!" Ares shouted. "Now, I'm going to release Xena and Gabrielle. Don't tell them anything about what we talked about, or I'll see to it you regret it."

He snapped his fingers, and both women instantly came to life. Xena started, and noticed that Joxer and Ares were not in the same place they'd been a moment before. "What happened?" she demanded.

"Uh, nothing," said Joxer nervously.

"Come on, Joxer!" said Gabrielle, who noticed as well. "How did you get all the way over there?"

"Doesn't matter," Ares said. "Now get going."

"We're not going anywhere," said Xena firmly.

"Xena -" Joxer started to say. Then he turned to Ares. "Maybe they should stay. Just in case, uh, things don't work out like you think."

"What are you two talking about?" Xena was very suspicious now.

Ares didn't answer. He whipped his head around, and seemed to be listening to something the others couldn't hear. Suddenly he shook his head, and simply said, "Dahok."

Joxer looked scared again. "Here? Now?"

Ares nodded. "Yes. Outside. Right now. Hurry." With that, he vanished.

Joxer looked at Xena and Gabrielle. "I just wanted to say -" he stopped. "You two were the best thing that ever happened to me. Thank you. For everything." He turned and started to run, heading out of the temple.

Gabrielle looked at her friend. "Xena?" she said in a nervous voice.

Xena looked at her and said simply, "I know." With that, they both started running after Joxer.

* * *

><p>Joxer, Xena and Gabrielle ran out of the temple, to find the weather had changed greatly since they had entered. Thick clouds had covered the blue sky, and a fierce wind was roaring everywhere,

threatening to tear the trees from their roots and the temple from its foundations.<p>

They staggered about, and suddenly Ares appeared, but the customary light was dim somehow, and Ares himself seem to have lost his usual arrogance. They heard him mutter to himself, "I hope this works."

Suddenly, the wind died, and there was silence. Then the ground started to tremble, and an earthquake started. A great chasm appeared in the ground, splitting the area in half, and it widened considerably before a great tower of flame erupted from the depths.

The group staggered back, the light and heat too painful to bear, when the flames seemed to coalesce and concentrate themselves into a small area. With a burst of light, everything exploded, and then seemed to implode into a human shape, that quickly morphed into a short, blonde-haired human form.

Joxer, Xena and Gabrielle gasped as they recognised him. Ares merely snorted. "Iolaus again? Really, Dahok," he said in disdain.

"At last I have come again to claim what is to be Mine," Dahok spoke not with Iolaus's voice, but in a weird sort of resonating timbre with the inflexion of Godhead. "Do not stand against Me Ares, or this time you will truly feel My wrath."

"Isn't this song getting a little old?" Ares sneered. "I'm sure you haven't forgotten what's happened before, when the urge comes on you to get that old change-of-address card."

Dahok's eyes glowed red with anger, but the expression on his Iolaus-face didn't change. "I was a fool to think you were worthy of being the father of Hope's children. Perhaps I should have sought the services of your brother Hercules. At least he had the courage to try to exorcise Me."

Ares snarled in anger and was about to step forward, when Xena grabbed his arm. He looked at her, and understood what she was saying without words: Don't let him get to you. He nodded, and turned his attention back to Dahok.

By this time the evil god had turned his attention to the war god's companions. "Who are these mortals who stand with you before Me?" he said in that strange voice. "Come forward and show yourselves."

Xena, Gabrielle and Joxer stepped forward. Dahok looked at Gabrielle first, and an evil smile came onto his face for the first time. "Gabrielle," he said in an almost intimate kind of voice.

Gabrielle shivered, finding it almost impossible to look at him. "You're not Iolaus," she stated desperately.

"What's wrong? Don't you like this face, this body? I do, it suits Me. I can even be him if you want Me to," he said with that evil smile still in place. "I know all his secrets, since We shared the same corpse for such a long time. Remember the story you once told, about people having four arms and two heads being split apart and

then searching for someone who shares the same soul? I do. I â€ feel it."

Xena placed a hand on her shoulder. "Don't listen to him," she said quietly.

Dahok turned his attention to her. "Xe-na," his gaze turning malevolent. "You have been a thorn in My side since the beginning. It will give me great pleasure to rid the world of you."

"A lot of people have said that to me over the years Dahok," she said defiantly, "but as you can see, I'm still here."

"For now," he said emotionlessly. He then turned his attention to Joxer. "Who are you?"

Joxer looked nervous. "Uh, I'm Joxer the Mighty -"

For the first time Dahok looked uncertain, confused. "What is it about you that disturbs Me? Something â€ familiar. I've seen you elsewhere, before this -"

"Well, you might have noticed me that day when Callisto was killed, I, uh, happened to have the Hind's Blood dagger on me at the time -" Joxer started to say.

"SILENCE!" Dahok's voice cut through Joxer's speech. "You chatter like a fool. You're irrelevant."

"Hey!" said Joxer with unthinking indignation. Gabrielle elbowed him in the side, and he looked at her and shut up, realising who he was talking to. Fortunately Dahok's attention was already elsewhere.

"Ares," Dahok said to the other god, "leave now or suffer the consequences. The choice is yours."

"Really?" Ares smirked at his opponent. "You offer such a limited range of options. Any chance of expanding the market?"

Dahok's eyes glowed momentarily red again in fury. "So be it," he said, and he pointed his right index finger at Ares, and a burst of flames came shooting out of it straight for the war god. Ares simply vanished, and the flames passed harmlessly through the space he'd been occupying a scant moment before.

Ares reappeared, with an amused expression on his face. "I've learned a few new tricks, you can't deprive me of my powers like before. That the best you can do?" he said with that arrogant smirk. He then extended his own arm, and lightning burst out of his hand and headed for Dahok.

The lightning hit, but didn't seem to affect him. He just stood there, and a halo of white light enveloped him, till Ares ran out of power and Dahok returned to normal. "I could say the same thing about you," Dahok said casually.

Ares started to look worried. Dahok raised his right arm, and clenched his fist. All of a sudden Ares began to choke, unable to breathe. "Let go of him!" shouted Xena.

"I think not," said Dahok. By now Ares was in bad shape, about to pass out. "What should I do with you, Ares? Killing you wouldn't be satisfaction enough. Besides, I despise Hind's Blood. What is it you most fear?" He looked straight at Ares, as if looking into the depths of his soul. Suddenly he drew in a sharp breath and said, "Of course. There's a very fitting fate for you, false god of false worship."

Dahok's eyes turned red again, and this time stayed that way. Ares jerked up, and a glowing light seemed to come out of him, growing dim and vanishing as it went up and away. Dahok returned to normal, and Ares collapsed onto the ground.

"What happened?" said Joxer in amazement, as the three of them rushed over to help him up.

"I think he just lost his godhood," said Xena equally amazed.

"Can Dahok do that?" asked Gabrielle.

"Sure feels like it," mumbled Ares as he tried to reorient himself. He looked around, standing erect. "Mortality. It sucks!" he suddenly shouted.

"I want you to live a full human lifetime, Ares," Dahok said with an evil glare. "Be one of the creatures you despised so much. I'm looking forward to the day you worship Me as your God, when all of this world is Mine."

"Fat chance!" Ares shouted back at him.

Gabrielle suddenly seemed to lose it, and cried, "Enough is enough!" She ran straight towards Dahok, intending to hit him with her staff. Dahok merely gave her an amused glance, and with a wave of his hand sent her flying through the air to land behind the others. "Do not annoy Me, Gabrielle," he said suddenly angry, "My daughter Hope may want you intact, but there are limits to My generosity."

Xena drew her sword, and with a loud battle cry charged at Dahok, only to suffer the same fate. "I have no such inhibitions with you, Xena," he said menacingly.

Before he could do anything though, Ares grabbed Joxer and said, "It's all up to you now. You have to do something!"

Joxer looked at him in shock. "You want me to go after him with this?" and he drew his sword.

"No, you idiot!" said Ares urgently. "Look at what happened to me, Xena and Gabrielle. We won't get anywhere trying to fight fire with fire. We need to fight fire with ice!"

Joxer looked confused. "What the -"

Ares could wait no longer. "Close your eyes and think about Tigellinus!" he shouted, hoping that his theory was right. Joxer quickly obeyed.

Dahok was looking at them suspiciously, having overheard their

conversation, but not understanding their intentions. "Tigellinus?" Dahok said vaguely. "That is a name from long ago!"

Suddenly Joxer floated three feet up into the air, opening his eyes and dropping his sword, with his arms flailing about trying to get down. "What's happening?" he shouted.

"Keep concentrating, you fool!" Ares called out. As Dahok watched in confusion, Joxer closed his eyes again and his right forearm, where the message from Tigellinus was tattooed began to glow with the same blue light it had when the writing first appeared. Quickly it spread throughout his body, till all of Joxer was glowing with that unearthly blue light. "That's it!" yelled Ares. "Now! Now!"

All of a sudden Joxer's head jerked back, and his back arched; SOMETHING burst out of Joxer's body, it was roughly man-shaped but huge, indistinct like fog, and white as a creature of snow or ice. It sped out and headed straight for Dahok, as Joxer collapsed onto the ground.

"NO!" screamed Dahok. His Iolaus-body dissolved into its old form, that of unrestrained fire, and met the ice creature head on. The two forms melded, white and red-orange encircling each other. A huge roar could be heard, and the wind started whipping madly around, as the terrible forces tore at each other.

Eventually, the white started to disappear. "No!" shouted Ares in alarm. But it was too late. The fire was victorious, and as the ice disappeared completely the Iolaus body was reformed. But it looked very different from before; it was now bruised and bloody, with a split lip as a reflection of the fight it had so recently won. "That truly annoyed Me," hissed Dahok with unrestrained fury.

Ares held out his hands as if in supplication. "Now, let's not do anything rash -"

"ENOUGH TALK!" screamed Dahok, his eyes red and raising his arms above his head. Suddenly the temple and many trees surrounding it burst into flames, giving the world a taste of the things to come.

All of a sudden, a gigantic bolt of lightning split the sky, hitting Dahok dead on target. He screamed as again the Iolaus body dissolved, and the tower of fire retreated back down into the depths of the earth.

"ANOTHER TIME, ARES!" a howl of anger was heard as Dahok left defeated.

* * *

><p>Xena and Gabrielle by this time had picked themselves up, and rushed over to join Ares and Joxer. Gabrielle spied Joxer's crumpled form, and knelt down to examine him. "We have to get help for him!" she said urgently.<p>

"No," said Ares, shaking his head and looking at them. "It's too late. There's nothing we can do for him."

"You can't give up just like that!" she cried out. "Can't YOU do

something?"

Ares just shrugged and shook his head. "I'm mortal now, remember? It's strange, I'd almost forgotten what death is like when you're vulnerable this way."

"So how long are you going to be like this?" asked Xena.

"I don't know," confessed Ares. "I'm not exactly very popular right now with the other gods. I don't want to consider it, but this could be -" he shuddered, "- permanent."

Gabrielle was still cradling Joxer's corpse in her arms. Slowly she got up, and stared at him. "He tried to save us," she said in sorrow. "Oh Gods, I'm so sorry Joxer!"

"Well, he died a hero, a true warrior's death," said Ares in sympathy. "That was what he always wanted, you know, if it's any comfort Gabrielle."

Xena was staring at him. "I nearly couldn't remember what you were like as a mortal," she said with a slight smile on her face. "You know, I definitely prefer you this way, compared to the arrogant jerk who happens to be a god."

Ares shuddered again. "Don't say that. You'll ruin my reputation."

Gabrielle looked at them both. "What happened exactly?" she asked. "How did you drive Dahok away, how did you defeat him without your powers?"

"I didn't," confessed Ares, starting to pace around. "Joxer did the most important damage, but I think it was my father who drove him away with that lightning bolt, in the end."

"But how -?"

"The prophecy tattooed on Joxer's arm," said Ares looking at them. "Tigellinus - or rather his spirit - left us enough clues to defeat Dahok, at least this time."

"This time?" said Xena in alarm.

Ares shrugged. "You must have heard him. But getting back to Joxer, the Chin Master who was able to foresee this warned that sacrifices would have to be made in order to defeat Dahok. One of them was my godhood. Another would be Joxer's life."

"And you accepted that?" Xena asked incredulous.

"Not at first," he said with a fleeting grin. "In fact, I was furious. But the prophecy said if I didn't do what I did, death and destruction would inevitably follow. Even the Gods would be cast down from Olympus, into Tartarus to suffer for eternity. That's why I gave Joxer the Stone of Enlightenment, it contained a small portion of my powers. Basically, he became a temporary God of War, it helped him enough so that Dahok could be driven away."

"That pendant," Gabrielle realised.

"Yes."

"Even though you knew it would kill him!" Gabrielle's tone held no forgiveness.

Ares sighed. "He was already dead, Gabrielle, he and I both knew that even though the two of you didn't."

Xena frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Ares said gently, "The prophecy said that the dead would injure Dahok in a way no living creature could, so that he would be weakened and able to be driven away." He shrugged again. "Joxer was the one to fulfill that part of the scenario. I'd help him now if I could, but -"

"No! He wasn't dead!" said Gabrielle in horror.

"Yes he was," said Ares firmly.

"But how -?"

"Tigellinus," said Xena suddenly. "The cave-in."

"Very good, Xena," Ares said with an approving look. "Like I've said before, Tigellinus was very sneaky. Sneaky enough even to outwit Dahok. He kept Joxer in the land of the living somehow, and able to fight a god. Maybe Aphrodite was right, and he didn't deserve the fate he got. I could have used someone with as many sneaky talents as him."

* * *

><p>A moment later, right on cue, Aphrodite appeared with the usual herald of light. "NOW you believe me!" she said in mock exasperation.<p>

"Hello, sis," he said in mild disdain. "Come to gloat over my misfortune?"

Aphrodite groaned. "How can we be related? You can be so dumb sometimes!"

Gabrielle murmured to Xena, "Well, if that isn't the pot calling the kettle black -"

Fortunately Aphrodite seemed not to hear. "I mean, look at this mess!" she gestured around at the ruined countryside. "Someone has to fix up the damage, and it's not going to be me!"

Ares grinned at her. "I don't know what you expect me to do about it, I'm not a god anymore -"

Aphrodite shook her head, her blonde hair flipping from one side of her head to the other. "Oh nooo!" she said. "You don't get out of it that easy!"

Ares looked at her in confusion. "What do you mean?"

Suddenly Zeus appeared, with a more intense light show than either of his children was capable of producing. "Now what do you think she means?" he said looking at his son.

"Father," Ares said lowering his eyes, then quickly raising them again. "Zeus."

"Anything to say?" the King of the Gods asked him.

Ares looked him in the eye and said, "Good timing you've got there."

Zeus lifted his eyebrows. Ares quickly added, "And thanks for saving my life."

Zeus snorted. "You're impossible. Maybe the warrior princess is right, you would be more agreeable as a mortal."

Aphrodite looked at him in horror. "Daddy, you promised me!"

"Yes, yes," Zeus said gruffly, "even though I know I'm going to regret itâ€¦" he held out his hand, and the light of godhood poured back into Ares.

Ares straightened up, and began laughing in his old arrogant manner. "I'm BACK!" he said in an exulting tone, as he examined his profile. "I'm off to celebrate!"

"Wait!" said Gabrielle, "Can't you do something about Joxer now?"

Ares laughed again. "Who cares about him?" and he vanished in a burst of light, still laughing.

"No!" screamed Gabrielle. "Damn you Ares-!"

"He's definitely back all right," said Xena with a sour look.

Zeus looked at his daughter. "What did I tell you?" he said to Aphrodite wearily.

"Well, he has a point," Aphrodite shrugged.

"WHAT? DAMN YOU ALL!" Gabrielle yelled at the top of her lungs. "Joxer DIED for you! Without his sacrifice all you Gods would be in Tartarus! And now none of you even care? I swear I don't know who is worse, you or Dahok! At least you don't see him treating us this way!"

"Gabrielle!" Xena said frantically, trying to draw her away and shut her up before the gods killed her for her outburst.

Zeus merely glanced at her. "You sound just like my son Hercules," he said to her in that same weary manner. He then looked at her more closely. "You're not one of my daughters, are you?"

"No!" exclaimed Gabrielle.

He shrugged. "Just a thought."

Aphrodite said in disgust, "Eeeeeew, what an idea! Me and her â€" SISTERS?"

Xena could not help smiling. "I can see the family resemblance," she said.

Gabrielle looked horrified. "XENA!"

Xena shrugged. "Sorry."

Her friend ignored her, and said, "What about Joxer?"

Aphrodite said thoughtfully, "You know, she might be onto something."

Zeus looked at her. "What?"

She shrugged herself. "I was right about Tigellinus, wasn't I? I think I'm right about this. Besides, I had plans for my little sweetcheeks over there. Trust me. Bring him back."

Zeus shrugged again. "Do you really want me to overrule the Fates? Is Joxer that important?"

"He might be. And what if one day Dahok comes back new and improved -?"

He nodded. "Oh, very well." He gestured with his right hand again, and Joxer's body was enclosed in a blinding white light. When Xena and Gabrielle could see again, Joxer was standing up very much alive.

Xena said to Zeus, "Thank you for bring him back to us."

Zeus waved that aside, already looking disinterested. "Don't mention it." He vanished just like Ares had.

Joxer looked at Aphrodite and said with his head bowed, "Thank you, Aphrodite. I'm yours to command."

"Joxer, no!" said Gabrielle urgently. "Don't do this! She doesn't deserve your loyalty, none of them do!"

"Gabrielle, I owe her my life!" said Joxer, shocked. Then he said to the goddess, "What is it you want me to do first?"

She just grinned slyly. "I'll be in touch. I suggest you start with improving the cooking!" she said with a humorous laugh, and vanished like the other gods before her.

"Hey!" exclaimed Joxer. "My arm!" They looked at his right forearm, and sure enough the ancient tattoo was gone. "Everything's back to normal!"

Xena said grimly, "No, this is just the beginning. We haven't heard the last of Dahokâ€|"

****THE END****

End
file.